

# Bombing of Rome in World War II

The **bombing of Rome in World War II** took place on several occasions in 1943 and 1944, primarily by Allied and to a smaller degree by Axis aircraft, before the city was invaded by the Allies on June 4, 1944. Pope Pius XII was initially unsuccessful in attempting to have Rome declared an open city, through negotiations with President Roosevelt via Archbishop (later Cardinal) Francis Spellman. Rome was eventually declared an open city on August 14, 1943 (a day after the last Allied bombing) by the defending forces.<sup>[1]</sup>



Inscription on the wall of a bombed building, translated as "Work of the Liberators!" Rome, 1944

The bombings of the "Eternal City" were controversial for several reasons, especially for the Americans. Rome had been the Capital City of Italy for around 70 years, but large parts of the city were more than 2,500 years old. Rome is the Capital of Catholicism and within its city limits was the neutral Vatican City. The Vatican also owned many churches and other buildings outside its territory but within Rome city limits. Many Americans were against a major destruction of Rome. However, the British War Cabinet refused to see bombing Rome as a crime against humanity. The first bombardment occurred on July 19, 1943 and was carried out by 500 American bombers which dropped 1,168 tons of bombs. The entire working class district of San Lorenzo was destroyed, and 3,000 Italian civilians were killed in the raids over five residential/railway districts. The military targets were few, the largest Stazione Termini contained a marshaling yard, railways and industries that manufactured steel, textile products and glass. Winston Churchill approved the bombardment by the words "I agree, W.S.C. 16.7.43." <sup>[2]</sup>

In the 110,000 sorties that comprised the Allied Rome air campaign, 600 aircraft were lost and 3,600 air crew members died; 60,000 tons of bombs were dropped in the 78 days before Rome was captured.<sup>[3]</sup>

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## Correspondences between Pius XII and Roosevelt

Following the first Allied bombing of Rome on May 16, 1943 (three months before the German Army occupied the city), Pius XII wrote Roosevelt asking that Rome "be spared as far as possible further pain and devastation, and their many treasured shrines... from irreparable ruin."<sup>[4]</sup>

On June 16, 1943, Roosevelt replied:

“ Attacks against Italy are limited, to the extent humanly possible, to military objectives. We have not and will not make warfare on civilians or against nonmilitary objectives. In the event it should be found necessary for Allied planes to operate over Rome, our aviators are thoroughly informed as to the location of the Vatican and have been specifically instructed to prevent bombs from falling within Vatican City.<sup>[5]</sup> ”

Bombing of Rome was controversial, and General Henry H. Arnold described Vatican City as a "hot potato" because of the importance of Catholics in the U.S. Armed Forces.<sup>[6]</sup> British public opinion, however, was more aligned towards the bombing of the city, due to the participation of Italian planes in The Blitz over London.<sup>[6]</sup> H.G. Wells was a particularly vocal proponent of doing so.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Notable raids

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### July 19, 1943

On July 19, 1943, Rome was bombed again, more heavily, by 521 Allied planes, with three targets, causing thousands of civilian casualties. After the raid, Pius XII, along with Msgr. Montini (future Pope Paul VI), travelled to the Basilica di San Lorenzo fuori le Mura, which had been badly damaged, and distributed £ 2 million to the crowds.<sup>[8][9]</sup> Between 11 a.m. and 12 noon, 150 Allied B-17 Flying Fortresses attacked the San Lorenzo freight yard and steel factory. In the afternoon, the second target was the "Scalo del Littorio" on the northern side of Rome. The third target was the Ciampino airport, on south-east side of Rome.

### August 13, 1943

Three weeks later, on August 13, 1943, Allied planes again bombed the city, targeting San Lorenzo and Scalo del Littorio.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Bombing of Vatican City

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Vatican City maintained an official policy of neutrality during the war.<sup>[11]</sup> Both Allied and Axis bombers made some effort not to attack the Vatican when bombing Rome. However, Vatican City was bombed on at least two occasions, once by the British and once by the Germans.

### November 5, 1943

On November 5, 1943, a single plane dropped four bombs on the Vatican, destroying a mosaic studio near the Vatican railway station and breaking the windows of the high cupola of St. Peter's, and nearly destroying Vatican Radio.<sup>[12]</sup> There were no fatalities.<sup>[12]</sup> Damage from the raid is still visible.<sup>[13][14]</sup>

### March 1, 1944

On March 1, 1944, German airplanes dropped six bombs over the Vatican, littering the Court of Saint Damaso with debris.

## Notes

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- Döge, p. 651–678

2. Vatican TV-documentary "Bombing of Rome", Road Television srl, Executive Prod. & Director Maurizio Carta, Producer Claudia Pompili, CTV Centro Televisivo Vaticano. Historians interviewed Richard Overy, Andrea Riccardi, Robert Katz, David Forgacs, Gaetano Bordoni and others
3. Lytton, p. 55 & 57
4. Roosevelt *et al.*, p. 90
5. Roosevelt *et al.*, p. 91
6. Murphy and Arlington, p. 210
7. <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks13/1303501h.html>
8. Murphy and Arlington, p. 212–214
9. Trevelyan, p. 11
10. Murphy and Arlington, p. 214–215
11. [http://ww2db.com/country/vatican\\_city](http://ww2db.com/country/vatican_city)
12. Murphy and Arlington, p. 222
13. [http://orbiscatholicus.blogspot.com/2008/05/wwii-when-vatican-was-bombed\\_31.html](http://orbiscatholicus.blogspot.com/2008/05/wwii-when-vatican-was-bombed_31.html)
14. <http://battlefieldseurope.co.uk/ww2it.aspx>

## References

- Döge, F.U. (2004) "Die militärische und innenpolitische Entwicklung in Italien 1943-1944", Chapter 11, in: *Pro- und antifaschistischer Neorealismus* ([http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/diss/receive/FUDISS\\_thesis\\_000000001408](http://www.diss.fu-berlin.de/diss/receive/FUDISS_thesis_000000001408)). PhD Thesis, Free University, Berlin. 960 p. [in German]
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- Murphy, P.I. and Arlington, R.R. (1983) *La Popessa: The Controversial Biography of Sister Pasqualina, the Most Powerful Woman in Vatican History*. New York: Warner Books Inc. ISBN 0-446-51258-3
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- Trevelyan, R. 1982. *Rome '44: The Battle for the Eternal City*. New York: Viking. ISBN 0-670-60604-9

## Further reading

- Carli, Maddalena; Gentiloni Silveri, Umberto. *Bombardare Roma: gli alleati e la città aperta, 1940-1944* (in Italian). (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007)

## External links

- Bombing of Rome documents at FDR presidential library (<http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/andyc/fdr/psfa/psf/box51/a466y01.html>)
- Collection of documents related to Australian bishops and the bombing of Rome (<http://john.curtin.edu.au/letters/keyword/rome-bombing.html>)

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